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PEDAGOGY

Watching *Dallas* again 2: Locating viewing pleasures —An audience study of the new *Dallas*

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[0.1] Abstract—This audience reception project performs a study of the first season of the new *Dallas* (2012–14) in terms of its lack of ironic viewing, which relegates the show to a restorative form of nostalgia.

[0.2] Keywords—Ien Ang; Nostalgia; TV studies

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1. Introduction

[1.1] The original *Dallas* (1978–91), which built on the ongoing, overlapping serialized narratives popularized in the first real prime time soap opera, *Peyton Place* (1964–69), was the basis of an entirely new genre of prime time soaps that hit the airwaves in the 1980s, including *Knots Landing* (1979–93, a *Dallas* spin-off), *Dynasty* (1981–90), and *Falcon Crest* (1981–90). The new *Dallas* (2012–14) displays a remarkable fidelity to the legendary series that inspired it. Not only with respect to its narrative development—the interplay between predictability and complexity—but also with respect to its visual style—the lush colors, the static camera, the (for current standards) long shot durations, and the harmonically balanced, precisely symmetrical image compositions—the sequel boasts a desire for continuation, if not restoration. Of course, this mode of what Svetlana Boym (2001, 41) terms "restorative nostalgia" is only one way of framing the new *Dallas*. Does it not also inhabit its conceptual opposite? That is, is its nostalgia not also highly reflective precisely in its excessive mode of continuation/restoration? To relate it to the production of viewing pleasure, does it not also invite an ironic gaze?

[1.2] This study attempts to broach these questions. This research project, which studied a sequel, is itself constructed in a follow-up logic, with Ien Ang's pioneering *Watching Dallas*, published in Dutch in 1982 and translated into English in 1985, as well as her more recent work on ironic viewers (2007), as the guiding precursor texts. Our project is brought into dialogue with Ang's work both methodologically and in terms of the interpretive framework. It is this dialogue that functions as our operational logic, through which the (necessary) differences in methodology and the divergences in the data are teased out, then ultimately, historically, and culturally situated with respect to contemporary television practices and their attached forms of viewing pleasure. These contemporary practices, particularly the diversification and "genrefication" of present-day television, offer a likely explanation for the distinct lack of ironic viewing we ultimately found among the audience members of the new *Dallas*.

2. Methodology—Choosing a research question

[2.1] On the basis of our conviction that the great expansion and diversification of television practices since the original series went off air had produced similarly variegated and wide-ranging forms of audience pleasures, we initially expected to find a great multiplicity of perspectives on the new *Dallas*. We ourselves already evinced a diversity of affective positioning, ranging from absolute enjoyment in immersion to a radically distanced, critical mode of viewing. Yet although we were internally diverse, we were nevertheless united by a certain obliqueness of our viewing angles. Each of our affective positions was slightly askew, affected by the fact that we had watched the first season of the show with such great attentiveness because it was a necessary precursor for this research. Of course, there is no such thing as a purely academic exercise: no matter how hard one tries, one will become emotionally invested—not only in the topic at hand, but also in the supposedly objective angle as such. This also demonstrates the problematic of the very attempt at establishing an exact typology of viewing pleasures. If one can be emotionally objective, one can also be immersively ironic, but by no means do we wish to pitch irony, immersion, or value against each another.

[2.2] Indeed, what makes Ang's original study so fascinating is precisely this dismantling of the charged value dichotomy between spectatorial pleasures. Although, as Ang wrote, these polarities are "difficult to reconcile," in her reading, irony turns into a modality of "real love"—a "weapon" that enables one to enjoy a supposedly shallow show "without suffering pangs of conscience" (Ang 1985, 109, 101). Spectatorial distance (the degree of one's removal from the medium) is situated; one's viewing position constantly slides, eroded by the push and pull of affect. If between us we displayed an array of directionalities of investment and affective movements, these movements were commonly vectored and traversed by certain institutional requirements and scholarly ambitions. Whether our viewing position was emotionally invested, critically distanced, or clinically immersive, our authorial position was inevitably framed by the way our passion is supposed to be articulated in accordance with the discursive boundaries of what qualifies as an academic exercise.

[2.3] Negotiating our individual readings, we began by deciding how to phrase the question we would pose. Ang's original question, translated into English, ran as follows:

[2.4] I like watching the TV serial *Dallas* but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis. Please write to...(Ang 1985, 10)

[2.5] As a consequence of the aforementioned desire for our project to create a dialogue with Ang's, we aimed to maintain many elements of her work so as to retain a common framework in which comparisons could take place. We thus decided to stay as close to Ang's original phrasing as possible, making only changes that were necessary to reflect the different circumstances of our project and to increase the quality and quantity of responses. Consequently, we changed it from the first person singular to the first person plural in order to display that ours was a joint project. We also changed the wording from "Would anyone like to" to "Would you like to," because we thought that a more direct interpolation of each individual, rather than appealing to the whole viewing public at once, might increase the number of replies and elicit more immediate, personally invested responses. Additionally, we rendered the final part of the question more succinct to hold the interest of participants, and we deliberately kept the description of our project nonspecific so as to avoid unwittingly influencing respondents with the presumed importance of the project. The question we decided on therefore reads as follows:

[2.6] We like watching the TV serial *Dallas* but often get odd reactions to it. Would you like to briefly share with us why you like or dislike watching it, as a contribution to our research project?

3. Methodology—Reaching the audience

[3.1] In order to provide a counterpoint to our colleagues' concurrent project, which focused, like Ang's, on the Dutch audience, we decided to access an international, mostly American, audience. We narrowed this focus further, choosing particularly to target the Dolly Parton fan scene, in which a member of our research group is involved, because it had displayed a lively discussion about the new season of *Dallas* when it was airing in the United States. It promised to be a group with many members likely to have watched the show, but one that was not demarcated simply by this viewership, which could provide a mix of casual and dedicated viewers. In keeping with Ang's methodology, we approached our audience as insiders in order to be as conversant as possible with the cultural discourse in which our audience was embedded. Thus, our insider posted the question as her Facebook status and also in one of the larger Dolly Parton Facebook groups.

[3.2] Within a few days, however, we realized that this approach did not generate enough responses for the comprehensive response analysis we had in mind. In fact, we had received no responses to the first post and only two responses to the second. Neither of the responses to the second post was productive. The first discussed only the old *Dallas*, the second failed to directly address the series, and both were too short to permit us to draw any meaningful conclusions.

[3.3] Consequently, we had to make changes to our methodology. Assuming that the lack of (useful) responses occurred because of the current off-air status of the series—which means that casual viewers would not be sufficiently engaged to respond—we decided to directly tap the *Dallas* fan base. We thus researched Facebook groups and Internet forums for *Dallas*, for TNT (the American cable network broadcasting *Dallas*), and for soap operas in general, singling out all those that allowed questions of extratextual nature and use (like research) to be posted. Because of the aforementioned problem with the first attempt, we decided to clarify that we wished to discuss the new *Dallas*. We also wanted to overcome the earlier problem of the brevity of responses, so we included an e-mail option for those respondents eager to reply in greater detail or with wider exemplification. The amended question read:

[3.4] We liked watching the new season of the TV serial *Dallas* but often get odd reactions to it. Would you like to briefly share with us why you like or dislike watching it, as a contribution to our research project? For longer responses, feel free to send us an e-mail at [redacted].

[3.5] We posted the amended question in three Facebook groups and four online forums. In order to reanimate slackening or inactive discussions, we attempted to encourage individual respondents to elaborate further on their points (with moderate success). After all the discussions had died down, we collated the results. In total, we received 43 responses, of varying length and relevance, from 23 individual respondents.

4. Collating responses—Nostalgia and irony

[4.1] The comments in response to our questions shared basic themes with the responses collated in *Watching Dallas*. As Ang's findings display, viewers of soap opera-style television programs switch effortlessly between textual and extratextual discourses, while describing a pleasure in the show's narrative development and its overall aesthetics as well as their personal engagement with the show's characters as if they are (yet being aware that they are not) real people (Ang 1985; Allen 1995). This form of media literacy is also demonstrated in the comments by the 2012 audience, where posts veer from discussions about the show's writers, to ratings, to set decoration and acting skills, to the characters' actions or personalities. In addition, there are numerous references to executive producer Cynthia Cidre, sometimes shortened to CC, who is almost treated like a character in the show. This discussion of the show runner and her decisions shows just how involved the commentators are with the show. In an

interesting example of this involvement and fan appropriation of a cultural product, RR writes: "J.R. as ineffectual old fool is not a good look. CC should know that now based on feedback. No excuses this time. And, it's not about what CC likes. CC is in the wrong business if she does not get that now."

[4.2] There are, however, two fundamental differences between our findings and Ang's original results. The first difference can be found in the nostalgia underlying many of the comments of those viewers who brought the series into a direct relation to its famous precursor. One respondent, John, writes: "There was not one good original idea in the whole season. Anything that was good in it came from the original." He is not alone in this nostalgic praise of the original *Dallas*. Larry Hagman also receives rave reviews. AW writes: "J.R./Hagman is king," and respondent Soaplover adds "seeing the old characters again" as a reason to watch. On *Soapcentral*, Luca states: "I love the homage to the old *Dallas*." Many of the complimentary comments refer to the original show, and similarly, most of the critique takes a comparative approach.

[4.3] Whereas this first difference is of course an expected result for responses to a show that claims to be a sequel, the second difference is more significant on the interpretive level because it directly concerns the two modes of viewing Ang identified in *Watching Dallas*. Ang discerns on the one hand an "affective mode of pleasure, which is based on taking melodrama seriously" and on the other hand an "ironic pleasure," which is "a mode of viewing that is informed by a more intellectually distancing, superior subject position" (2007, 23). This latter mode incorporates a pleasure that runs transverse to the expected horizon of responses—an ambiguous enjoyment in a self-reflexive awareness, or, as Ang put it, a display of "pleasure in the show while simultaneously expressing a confident knowingness about its supposedly 'low' quality" (1985, 5).

[4.4] Yet the responses we received betray no ironic detachment. This is not to say that no critical positions were taken. Viewers are critical of various story lines, acting skills, or the amount of screen time certain characters get, but these elements are presented by respondents as detracting from their enjoyment of the show rather than a reason to watch it. In other words, there were no comments that suggested viewers were watching *Dallas* because the show is so bad that it's good, or in which viewers were actively distancing themselves from the material. In a prime example, the aforementioned John writes in a highly critical post on *Soapchat*: "And then we come to Jesse Metcalfe, who has almost single-handedly ruined the show." Thus, Metcalfe's lack of acting skills does not raise the issue of the campy character of the show but rather detracts from the pleasure experienced. To illustrate his involvement, this same informant is not afraid to praise elements of the show he does enjoy, like the skills of the director and the design of the costumes: "Sue Ellen looked stunning for her age. I loved the way they dressed her, that zipper dress was great." Indeed, the responses stayed on a level of a certain spectatorial deference. That is, all the comments can be located on an upright (as opposed to inverted) pleasure scale, and given Ang's original bifurcated pleasure topography, the lack of ironic responses to our research question posed an interpretive conundrum.

5. Does the medium matter? Methodology versus cultural setting

[5.1] Though our findings seem to point to a complete absence of ironic viewing pleasures, it is important to bear in mind that an audience with an ironic stance might be markedly difficult to tap with the kind of research setup we used. Our suspicion is that these viewers are not as invested in the meta-TV community as the audience seeking an authentic form of immersion. The new *Dallas*, however, is just not widely watched enough for a methodological approach similar to Ang's—that is, addressing a more general audience—which might reveal a greater variety in terms of the audience's relation to, and investment in, the show. Then again, *Dallas*'s current lack of popularity might also be a direct indicator of its failure to attract ironic viewers.

[5.2] At first glance, the differences between our findings and Ang's reflect the methodological differences between the two projects. That is to say, the diverging data allude to the specificities and

limitations posed by the specific medium—the Internet—through which we both disseminated the question and gathered our responses.

[5.3] Because we distributed the question online, the target group of our project diverged considerably from Ang's, particularly in terms of gender, nationality, and engagement with *Dallas*. Ang posted her question in *Viva*, a general-interest Dutch woman's magazine (Ang 1985). Thus, her target population was heavily weighted toward women from The Netherlands, only some of whom would have been actively engaged with *Dallas*. However, the media used in our research—Facebook groups and Internet forums—led to our respondents having a quite different makeup. As a result of their use of these forums, our target population was considerably more likely to already be engaged with *Dallas*. The gender of 52 percent and nationality of 74 percent of our participants could be ascertained from their user profiles. Although it could be argued that the identity that these individuals present online may not be identical with their real-world identities, this does not inhibit our claims.

[5.4] Thus, when we speak of our participants, we refer not to the actual individual sitting at his or her computer screen but rather to the identity that individual chooses to present, under his or her chosen pseudonym, in the online environment. This is no different than Ang's study, where the participants presented their identity to the researcher in their letters. This also does not undermine our claims about the effects of these facets of identity on responses; an online gender identity, for example, can still have significant behavioral effects, even if not directly related to the gender of the individual. So of our respondents, 63 percent were male and originated from a wide range of countries, including Canada, Sweden, Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom; however, the majority of participants (59 percent) were American.

[5.5] By accessing more heavily engaged *Dallas* fans, we could have inadvertently filtered out all those who view it ironically. Yet it is not self-evident that just because a viewer takes an ironic stance, he or she is not also significantly invested in the show or would not also enjoy discussing it online. Furthermore, this argument would only be feasible for forums dedicated specifically to *Dallas* but would not apply so readily to the more general interest groups and forums in which we also posted, such as those focused on TNT or soap operas, none of which generated ironic responses.

[5.6] Thus, instead it could be argued that our lack of ironic viewers occurred because our responses were dominated by North Americans. There is some logic to such an argument; the content of *Dallas* and its cultural codes—language, landscape, gender roles, diegetic and nondiegetic music, modes of social interaction, dominance of capital both politically and culturally—are all easily identifiable as stereotypically North American. Consequently, those identifying as American watching the show might be seen as lacking what Millwood-Hargrave and Gatfield (2002) identify as a critical distance of spectatorship, which is a prerequisite for an ironic viewing.

[5.7] Yet apart from its literalist fallacy, this argument is undermined by the responses we received from non-Americans, which also exhibited no signs of ironic viewing. For example, Luca from Sweden, states, "IMO, it is excellent. I got hooked after episode 2 or 3"; Sofia from Australia states, "I can't praise Hagman enough: I thought he was absolutely brilliant," a point also agreed on by Hill23 from Scotland, who argues, "Hagman was superb...He is a formidable actor," and by Greg from Canada, who overflowed with excitement over "the fact that DALLAS IS BACK ON TV!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Hence, the responses we received from non-Americans do not suggest that they have a greater perspectival distance. That is, different national identification does not in this case result in a more explicitly critical, ironically distanced mode of viewing.

[5.8] In terms of gender, if anything, one would expect our population to result in more ironic views being expressed, not less. Soap operas are usually aimed at a predominantly female audience, and although *Dallas* is in many ways not a typical soap opera, Ang agrees that its primary audience is still female, which then might be seen as creating a distanced form of viewing for the male audience (Ang 1985). This is corroborated by Millwood-Hargrave and Gatfield's (2002) study of British soap operas,

where they found that ironic viewing of soap operas was more prevalent among the male audience. Male opinions are much more heavily represented in our results than in Ang's, yet we still found no evidence of ironic viewing practices. Consequently, the different target groups—emerging through the different media used to disseminate the question—do not explain the diverging data.

[5.9] The remaining question is whether the differences between the media through which responses were received are responsible for the lack of ironic viewers. The most crucial differences relate to publicness and visibility. Unlike Ang's research, where respondents wrote sealed letters addressed to one individual, almost all of our respondents replied through Internet forums. Our respondents therefore would have been aware that their contributions were publically available on the Internet, which could have deterred them from writing controversial responses. Moreover, this visibility also means that almost every response is heavily colored by the preceding comments, because discussions in online forums operate as extended dialogues with multiple nonlinear cross-references, rather than a series of linearly developed arguments. This is evident in one of the threads that began in response to our question, where three users began a long discussion, referring back and forth between their posts. Consequently, many responses either reply directly to those that came before them or are likely to contain similar themes. It could be argued, therefore, that when the standard response in fan forums is adoration, ironic viewers may be discouraged from responding, due both to normative reasons and to the visibility of responses and dialogic nature of the discussions.

[5.10] Yet this foregrounding of the new visibility in our approach underestimates the visibility of Ang's responses as well as her respondents' awareness of this visibility. In her question, she states: "I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis," meaning that the respondents would have been aware that they were not writing just for one single individual but that their views would potentially be accessible on a much wider scale. Furthermore, online forums arguably allow (or even invite) a greater form of anonymity than individual letters, however securely sealed they might be. Our users certainly maintained this anonymity; all used pseudonyms. As Sherry Turkle (2011) suggests in her study of online identity, the anonymity in Internet forums allows users to transgress the boundaries that circumscribe their off-line cultural discourses and hence allows them to act in ways that potentially undercut their morally anchored public identities. In Turkle's words, "The years of identity construction are recast in terms of profile production" (182).

[5.11] Indeed, because the form of visibility in online forums is markedly inauthentic, it could also be seen as encouraging users to be more controversial and to display their diverging, critically distant, and ironic angles on the show. Additionally, while it is likely the case that earlier responses would color later ones, this would not necessarily discourage people from expressing their ironic positions; they could have responded to earlier comments and discussed the same themes while still articulating disagreement. In short, perspectives pertaining to the specificity of the research medium do not suffice for an explanation of the absence of the parodic dimension that is significantly present in Ang's findings.

6. *Dallas* and contemporary media culture

[6.1] If not on a methodological level, *Dallas*'s position with respect to contemporary media culture does matter. In fact, a central reason for the lack of ironic responses is the change of size of its audience compared to the original series. The original was broadcast on CBS and the 2012 *Dallas* on TNT. Though this entails a switch from a public network to cable, both channels are/were available to almost all US households. Comparing the kind of viewers both shows attracted, it is nonetheless important to note that CBS is part of the "big three" networks (along with ABC and NBC), which, during the run time of the original *Dallas*, dominated American television. Attracting at its height over 90 million viewers for its legendary episode, "Who shot J.R.?", the original *Dallas* was immensely popular, if not generation-defining, with respect to 1980s popular culture. With respect to current television ratings, TNT's *Dallas* was only relatively successful, averaging 4.5 million viewers during its first season. This difference in audience size plays a crucial role with respect to the absence of reappropriated forms of spectatorship.

Because *Dallas* 2012 does not come close to the dominant position in the pop cultural discourse that the original series inhabited, there will be far fewer casual viewers watching it solely to engage in discussions about the latest highlights of popular culture. It is among this group that ironic viewers are more likely to be found.

[6.2] Furthermore, because TNT is an almost exclusively drama-oriented broadcaster—its motto boasts, "We know drama"—another reason for the lack of ironic viewers is the fact that contemporary productions of irony exist largely outside this genre. A genre that is deeply marked with irony is reality TV, with MTV's *Jersey Shore* (2009–12) its chief exponent. Looking at message boards relating to *Jersey Shore*, it is evident that it has a large following of ironic viewers. As one viewer almost apologetically explains on the *Jersey Shore* message boards at tv.com (<http://www.tv.com/>): "I find it amazing that I am actually so obsessed with this show. I realize how stupid they all are and how their actions are mildly retarded, but at the same time I can't look away." Thus, it is the diversity of the current television pleasurescape—with distinct shows like *Jersey Shore* catering to ironic viewing habits—that to a great degree explains the lack of voices of ironic enjoyment in the new *Dallas*. Such a finding, although not in line with Ang's findings in her original study, accords with her more recent work. Before the show's return was announced, Ang presciently predicted that *Dallas*, if watched today, would not attract ironic viewers, primarily because it would be "no longer in touch with the current, more explicitly ironic structure of feeling that has come to dominate" (Ang 2007, 6).

7. Locating irony

[7.1] Neither methodology nor audience composition can fully explain the complete absence of irony demonstrated in our gathered responses. The most likely reason is instead the increasingly diversified—and to a great degree genrefied—television landscape. Genrefication necessarily entails the tagging of viewing pleasures. The ironic enjoyment Ang found among *Dallas* viewers in 1982 is now first and foremost associated with MTV and its numerous makeover-themed reality TV shows, such as *Teen Mom* (2009–) and *Jersey Shore*, to name only two. Unlike *Dallas*, however, these television shows offer pleasure only on a "more is more" level happily embraced by its audience.

[7.2] This raises a question: Can viewing pleasure still be considered ironic when it only fulfills the horizon of pleasures tagged onto the show consumed? Relatedly, is an ironic pleasure not always based on a transverse act—that is, a deliberate misreading? With these questions in mind, current television practices display a transvaluation of irony. Laughing at 'The Situation' roaring, "It's T-shirt time!" is not ironic (only perhaps on a heightened, supposedly deferential level). That is, in an intricate ironic inversion, one might be again deferential in a secondary loyalty to the text. Our findings, however, do not hint at this mode of reading of the new *Dallas*. As such, *Dallas*'s lack of ironic viewers relegates the show to a merely restorative form of nostalgia. The potential pleasure derived from this mode of viewing quickly eroded, as Larry Hagman's death caused the show to lose one definite link to the past—and unquestionably its best actor. Although the second part of season 3 premiered in August 2014, the show was canceled a few months later. Though our study revealed some audience members who experienced genuine immersion and engagement with the current cast and story lines, it is clear that the limited audience was not enough to safeguard the show's existence.

8. Acknowledgments

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